

FOR QUESTIONS, COMMENTS OR CONTRIBUTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT: fukumotodsgn@earthlink.net or sensei@vhbt.org

In this issue, I will be covering various issues relating to Jodo Shinshu, that many appear to be unaware of. I will quote the source and comments at the end of each question.

Vohy is Todo Shinshu a unique Buddhist School?

JODO-SHINSHU AS A UNIQUE BUD-DHIST SCHOOL

Four factors that set Jodo-Shinshu apart:

1) Absence of meditation, 2) No superstitious beliefs or worldly benefits,
3) Non-monastic priesthood, and 4) Superficial similarities with Christianity.

Jodo-Shinshu does not require meditation like most other schools of Buddhism. To use an analogy, if we are like the circus tightrope walkers, then meditation provides us with the technique of how to walk and the pole to balance ourselves. In contrast, Jodo-Shinshu lends little assistance on the "how" of walking but simply says, "Don't worry, there is a safety net in case you fall!" With that assurance, we are able to be ourselves and walk naturally across.

Is there really no practice in Jodo-Shinshu? There are two meanings of "practice". One is to cultivate and change one's nature, especially to eradicate greed, hatred and delusion. This demands utmost dedication which essentially only the monks and nuns can satisfactorily carry out. The second meaning, however, does not call for such extreme change in nature but fosters self-reflection, trust and a new awareness about oneself and the world. Shinran Shonin rejected the first type of practice, calling it "self power" (jiriki) that belongs to the "gate to the path of

the sages" (shodo-mon).

"Self-power is the effort to attain birth (in the Pure Land), ... by endeavoring to make yourself worthy through amending the confusion in your acts, words, and thoughts, confident of your own powers and guided by your own calculation.

Other Power is the entrusting of yourself to the 18th among Amida Tathagata's Vows, the Primal Vow of birth through nembutsu, which Amida selected from among all other practices."

Shinran Shonin rejected the first type of practice? There are a number of reasons. The first and foremost is that enlightenment is already here and now, right under our feet. Do you recall the drowning swimmer struggling in the ocean metaphor? He awakened to the fact that he was safe and sound right where he was, in the middle of the ocean. Simply by a shift in his awareness, he found himself embraced by a supporting ocean. This awakening did not require him to swim to the distant island to find safety. The ocean was safe all along; the sailor simply needed to awaken to that truth. The ocean is that "Other Power" about which Shinran Shonin speaks so often.

Shinran Shonin chose the second type of practice, "self effort". In Jodo-Shinshu it has primarily taken the form of "listening to the Dharma" (monpo). We listen to the Dharma by seriously and intently listening to the Dharma talks given by teachers and, in a broader sense of the word, by studying the traditional scriptures and writings of contemporary teachers. Through intense and sincere listening, we are transformed to internalize the Buddhist ideals. This internaliza-

tion (Shinjin Awareness) allows us to practice the teachings in daily life, in general accordance with the same aims of precepts and meditations of the other Buddhist schools. This "self-effort," is distinguished from "self power". Self-effort is vital and needed. It is "practicing" without the self-centered motivation and attitudes of self-power!

Actually, so long as one does not see his or her efforts as directly causing enlightenment, a Jodo-Shinshu Buddhist is free to engage in any of the well-known forms of practice, including Zen and Vipasanna (of Theravada) meditations. Jodo-Shinshu strongly rejects the idea that our actions in themselves cause our enlightenment. When Jodo-Shinshu Buddhists practice, we do it out of a sense of gratitude. The late Prof. Ryukyo Fujimoto, a widely respected teacher of many active Jodo-Shinshu priests in North America, spoke of this gratitude:

"Birth through Faith alone, as based on the Eighteenth Vow, does not by any means discourage other Buddhist practices. They must, however, be performed in a spirit of gratitude toward the Tathagata (Amida Buddha). When we act out of deep-felt gratitude, we become less self-centered."

You can do what you want for practice as long as you do it with the proper attitude of gratitude.

Here is the web address for the article: http://nembutsu.blogspirit.com/ I have a comment regarding "self-effort" in that I believe that Shinran Shonin also expected a dialog to take place, one where sharing takes place. If we are to believe that all you do is listen intently

and seriously then internalize this information to be transformed, I think not. I believe we need to share and question, because only then are we able to understand the true meaning of the Nembutsu as taught by Shinran Shonin.

Cap you Compare Jodo Shinshu and Christianitys

JODO-SHINSHU TEACHINGS AS COMPARED TO CHRISTIANITY

Human Nature: Christians regard humans as deeply sinful (original sin and acquired sin) while Jodo-Shinshu regard humans as foolish (bombu). Both religions see human nature as self-centered, and assert that almost all people are unable to change their nature fundamentally through their own efforts.

The Ultimate: In Christianity God is ultimate, while it is Amida Buddha in Jodo-Shinshu. Both God and Amida represent spiritual power that lies outside our human capabilities. Both also have qualities that are diametrically opposed to the "sinful" Christians and "foolish" Jodo-Shinshu Buddhists.

God is the all powerful supernatural being who is the Maker, Lord and Father. Amida has none of the same characteristics, but is the "spiritual power" that we experience as understanding and caring in our lives.

Both teachings find humans to be incapable of realizing their spiritual goal by pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. Because of our sinful or foolish nature respectively, nothing we do can liberate us. So, no works or disciplines are required. Instead, our spiritual resolution relies on power beyond the self: God's grace in Christianity and the Other Power in Jodo-Shinshu.

Human Imperfection: Christian sin implies a failure to keep one's promise with God by not living in accordance with his will. The focus is on one's relationship to God. In contrast, foolishness (bombu) in Jodo Shinshu stems from being awakened by the Buddha's wisdom. The focus is the realization of one's inability to overcome one's self-centered attachments through one's own power. So, they differ in the reasons why humans are believed to be imperfect.

There is a subtle difference in the way

we relate to the transcendent spiritual source. Christians maintain an ongoing personal relationship with God who exists independently from humans and the world. This relationship is maintained largely through prayers, sacraments and contemplation. In contrast, Jodo-Shinshu Buddhists do not regard Amida as a divine being with whom they maintain an ongoing relationship. They realize their essential oneness with Amida in their oral recitation, for Amida is none other than the Name, "Namo Amida Butsu"

This article is also found at this web address: http://nembutsu.blogspirit.com/

An Interesting Perspective of Faith Y Practice, Nien Fo.

(Dharmavidya, inspired by Honen Shonin's Ichimai Kishomon)

For those with the karmic affinity with Amitabha Buddha, wishing to practice a religious life in truly simple faith, freeing themselves of sophistication and attachment to all forms of cleverness, the method of opening oneself to Amitabha's grace is the practice of Nien Fo with body, speech and mind, particularly verbal recitation of "Namo Amida Bu". This is not something done as a form of meditation, nor is it based on study, understanding and wisdom, or the revelation of deep meaning. Deep meaning is indeed there for the nembutsu is a window through which the whole universe of Buddha's teaching can be perceived in all its depth, but none of this is either necessary or even helpful to success in the practice. Rather such study cultivates secondary faculties to be held separate from the mind of practice itself.

The primary practice requires only one essential; realise that you are a totally foolish being who understands nothing, but who can with complete trust recite "Namo Amida Bu"; know that this will generate re-birth in the Pure land, without even knowing what rebirth in the Pure Land truly is. This is the practice for ignorant beings and ignorance is essential for its accomplishment. This practice automatically encompasses the three minds and the mind of contrition as a fourth. To pursue something more profound or more sophisticated, or to have a theory, or to think that understanding will yield greater enlightenment than this is to be misled and to fall back into selfpower whereby the whole practice is spoilt. However wise, learned or skilled you may be, set it aside and be the foolish being completely in the performance of the practice. Nothing else is required and anything else is too much. Faith and practice cannot be differentiated.

The Buddha-body is delineated by the precepts. How deficient we are in comparison! By our daily difficulty in the preceptual life, we awaken to the presence of the myriad karmic obstacles without which we would already perceive the land of love and bliss, we would be as the vow-body of Buddha. Thus we know in experience that we are foolish beings of wayward passion. This knowledge of our condition is part of the essential basis when it gives rise to contrition. Thus all obstacles become impediments to faith unless we experience contrition and letting go. Saving grace, as was made clear by Shan Tao's dream and advice to Tao Cho, only comes through the sange-mon.

If you can perform the practice in this simple minded way, Amida will receive you and you may fear for nothing since all is completely assured. Dwelling in this settled faith you may then use your secondary faculties, your knowledge and skills and accumulated experience, as tools for helping all sentient beings. But do not then think that anything of relevance to your own salvation is thereby accomplished, nor that you are making something of yourself. Whatever merit there may be in your actions of this kind, immediately and totally dedicate it to the benefit of others, that they may enter the Pure Land and that you yourself may not be encumbered by consciousness of virtue which will only contaminate the practice. As Honen says, "without pedantic airs, fervently recite the Name."

This article is found at this web address, 16 November 2005: http://nembutsu.blogspirit.com/liturgy/

A Final Note:

I have been busy with many things but still wanted to get a meaningful issue out. I hope this issue generates questions and with the end of Summer focus on the start of Dharma School. Take good care. NAMO AMIDA BUTSU